SHAKESPEARE – A RACIST OR A RACIALIST

Liliana Tronea-Ghidel
Assist., PhD., University of Craiova

Abstract:In this paper we will hopefully find the answer to the question: Was Shakespeare a racist or a racialist? I have considered Tzvetan Todorov's views who, in "Race and Racism" defines racialism as an acceptance of the existence of different human races, i.e. "human groupings whose members possess common physical characteristics," just like animal species (Todorov, 64-65). There is no racism involved in such an acceptance of the Other. Unfortunately, there is only one small step from racialism to racism, which – besides the recognition of biological differences among the different human races – acknowledges and stresses the so much exploited superiority of races to others. Todorov is very specific about the dangers of such an approach: "The form of racism that is rooted in racialism produces particularly catastrophic results" (Todorov, 64).

Keywords: Shakespeare, racism, racialism, skin colour, religion.

Though Shakespeare was not particularly preoccupied with matters of race, he finally managed to convey an overwhelming picture of the racial preconceptions and stereotypes which informed the writing and subsequent productions and reception of such plays as *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Tempest*. Shakespeare's representation or race is usually seen through the two stereotypes: the Moor and the Jew. However, we have encountered two other characters which hardly fit into the pattern: Cleopatra, the Egyptian Queen, and the savage Caliban. All of them – the Moors and the Jews, the North Africans and the island people – are distinguished by physical and religious traits, all important to an audience well aware of the presence of "too many Blackamoors" on the streets of London, and by the discreet but obvious existence of the Jews, so easily associated with trade and money-lending.

Theatre-goers of Shakespeare's time could easily recognize the "swart Cimmerian" (Aaron the Moor), or the "complexion" of the Prince of Morocco, resembling the "shadowed livery of the burnished sun", or Othello's "sooty bosom", or Cleopatra's "tawny front", and "Gypsy lust" not to mention the greedy money-lending Jew, and the most unfavourable image of deformed, monster-like Caliban – all of them expressions of *Otherness.*

There is a number of characters from Shakespeare's plays (Aaron, Shylock, Othello, and Caliban) from four plays (*Titus Andronicus, The Merchant of Venice, Othello,* and *The Tempest*) as Shakespeare's dramatis personae that may have something to do with race and racism. But the four characters do not exhaust Shakespeare's racial personae. In *The Merchant of Venice*, at least, there are two other Jews (Shylock's daughter Jessica and his friend Tubal) and one or two Moors (the Prince of Morocco and the Moor woman mentioned in passing as the one who was bearing Launcelot Gobbo's child), who either directly or indirectly bring their contribution to Shakespeare's racial vision. If we count also Aaron's black baby by Tamora and Caliban's hag mother Sycorax (who is also not presented but mentioned in the play), then Shakespeare's racial personae may be said to be above ten.

BDD-A28685 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

Of the eleven racial personae encountered in Shakespeare;s plays, only four are female (Jessica, Cleopatra, Sycorax, and Launcelot's Moor), but they are enough to connect race with gender. Among the eleven characters, again, we find three Jews (Shylock, Jessica, and Tubal), five Moors (Aaron and his baby, the Prince of Morocco, Launcelot's woman, and Othello), one Egyptian (Cleopatra), and two Algerians (Caliban and his mother Sycorax, since she is said to be from Argier). Up to Shakespeare's time, as we know, any race that was non-Greek, non-Roman, or non-Christian was thought to be barbarous. So, all of the characters would have been considered barbarous if none of them had converted to Christianity (like Jessica and Othello) or had been born of nobility (like Cleopatra or the Prince of Morocco). Anyway, in Shakespeare's vision race is also linked to religion and class, besides gender.

When discussing the authoritative Oxford Dictionary definition of race, we have gone as far as to establish that racism is often based on visible morphological characteristics such as skin color, hair type, and facial features. In the particular case of Shakespeare's plays under discussion, as in any society or natural environment, skin color is the most conspicuous and hence important characteristic used to identify a Moor or a foreigner, or to tell a white man from a barbarian. In *Titus Andronicus*, the black Aaron is compared to a "swart Cimmerian" (*TA*, 2.3.72); in *The Merchant of Venice*, the Prince of Morocco asks Portia not to dislike him "for my complexion" which is like the "shadowed livery of the burnished sun" (*MV*, 2.1.1-2); in *Othello*, Othello is said to have a "sooty bosom" and is likened to "an old black ram" (*OT*, 1.2.70 & 1.1.88). Othello is also said to have thick lips while Caliban is characterized as a deformed monster rather than a colored person, yet to Shakespeare's Elizabethans the Moors, the Egyptians, or the Algerians – all those African people were distinctly colored people.

Besides skin color, however, religion was another important characteristic for Shakespeare's Europeans to discriminate between themselves and aliens. It happened that Moors were usually Moslems. It followed, therefore, that Moslems were associated with colored people and a foreign race in Europe. But Islam was not the only religion to suggest religious difference to Christians. Judaism was another religion that made the Europeans differ from Jews. To be sure, no religion is ever conspicuously written on anyone's face: Islam or Judaism is a cultural manifestation, not a physical appearance. Yet, even though a white cannot easily tell himself apart from a Jew (who is not as colored as a Moor), he can observe a Jew's practice of Judaism and then find the needed difference to form his racialism. It is for this reason, perhaps, that in *The Merchant of Venice* the Christians as well as Shylock apparently equate the Jew's religion to his race and his nation.

In his "Race and Racism," Tzvetan Todorov says, "Racism is a matter of *behavior*, usually a manifestation of hatred or contempt for individuals who have well-defined physical characteristics different from our own" (64). This statement does not apply very well to the case of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, for Shylock is not identified in the play as a person with any particular skin color, hair type, or facial feature, but as a person with Jewish belief and Jewish behavior. So, through Shylock Shakespeare seems to suggest that racism does not necessarily arise from "well-defined physical characteristics" only: there are cases in which racism comes from different social conduct (e.g. Shylock's Jewish usury). Yet, Todorov's statement still holds true in that the Christians as well as Shylock do reveal their racism in their behavior, in their hatred or contempt for individuals who have nurture or nature different from their own. [1]

[1]Todorov, Tzvetan. "Race and Racism." Trans. Catherine Porter. *Theories of Race and Racism*. Ed. Les Back & John Solomos. London & New York: Routledge, 2000. 64-70.

BDD-A28685 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

Whenever we discuss any particular case of racism, we should take into consideration both sides: the side that has the visible differences and the side that sees or makes the differences, that is, the side of "the other" and the side of "the self." And, more often than not, we may find that the former side is the minority while the latter side is the majority in the society in which they live together. In Shakespeare's plays, for instance, Venice is where the Jews and the Moors appear and live with the native Venetians or Italians, but the Jews and the Moors are the minority side of "the other" that has the visible differences, whereas the whites or the Christians are the majority side of "the self" that sees and makes the differences. That is why W. H. Auden can say: "Shylock is a Jew living in a predominantly Christian society, just as Othello is a Negro living in a predominantly white society" (Auden, 232). [2]

American theoretician of culture and race, Kwame Antony Appiah resorts to *racialism* in order to acknowledge the presence of different races, each with its common traits, tendencies, or characteristics which he calls the "race essence".

According to Appiah, there are many distinct doctrines that compete for the term *racism*. The first doctrine is the view "that there are heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species, which allow us to divide them into a small set of races, in such a way that all the members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race." (Appiah, 13) [3]

These traits and tendencies characteristic of a race constitute, on the racialist view, a sort of racial essence; it is part of the content of racialism that the essential heritable characteristics of the "Races of Man" account for more than the visible morphological characteristics – skin color, hair type, facial features – on the basis of which we make our informal classifications. *Racialism* is at the heart of nineteenth-century attempts to develop a science of racial difference.

Racialism is not, in itself, a doctrine that must be dangerous, even if the racial essence is thought to entail moral and intellectual dispositions. Provided positive moral qualities are distributed across the races, each can be respected, can have its "separate but equal" place. Unlike most Western-educated people, I believe – and I shall argue in the essay on Du Bois – that racialism is false, but by itself, it seems to be a cognitive rather than a moral problem. The issue is how the world is, not how we would want it to be.

Racialism is, however, a presupposition of other doctrines that have been called "racism," and these other doctrines have been, in the last few centuries, the basis of a great deal of human suffering and the source of a great deal of moral error.

One such doctrine we might call *extrinsic racism:* extrinsic racists make moral distinctions between members of different races because they believe that the racial essence entails certain morally relevant qualities. The basis for the extrinsic racists' discrimination between people is their belief that members of different races differ in respects that *warrant* the differential treatment – respects, like honesty or courage or intelligence, that are uncontroversially held (at least in most contemporary cultures) to be acceptable as a basis for treating people differently. Evidence that there are no such differences in morally relevant characteristics – that Negroes do not necessarily lack intellectual capacities, that Jews are not especially avaricious – should thus lead people out of their racism if it is purely extrinsic.

[2] Auden, W. H. "Brothers and Others," in Wilders, John, ed. *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice* (London: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 224-240.
[3] Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

BDD-A28685 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

As we know, such evidence often fails to change an extrinsic racist's attitudes substantially, for some of the extrinsic racist's best friends have always been Jewish. But at this point – if the racist is sincere – what we have is no longer a false doctrine but a cognitive incapacity. , in her *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* (2002), Ania Loomba offers a comprehensive case study of the interpretations of race in Shakespeare's time, and distinguishes three "streams of ideas" which helped define "the making of beliefs and debates about 'otherness' and 'race' in early modern Europe. As regards *the first stream of ideas*, the author has in mind "medieval as well as classical notions about skin colour, religion and community." This is challenged by the "cross-cultural encounters" which are part of *the second stream of ideas*. These encounters turned into a challenge to the Europeans, and Ania Loomba finds a three-fold explanation in:

(1) the expansion of the colonial empires of England's rivals, Spain and Portugal;

(2) the menacing expansion of the Turkish Empire which threatened the stability of the Western World; and

(3) the discovery of the New World and its 'savage' people, which informed the Elizabethans' perception of the *Other*.

We have thus come to Ania Loomba's *third stream of ideas* which she considers for the understanding of the concept of 'race'; human societies encounter opposing notions, such as men vs. women (gender distinction), the wealthy vs. the needy (social distinction), nobles vs. commoners (class distinction). Here, I should add white vs. non-white (race distinction), or Christian vs. non-Christian (religious distinction), and the list may continue. But here is Ania Loomba again: "Concepts of gender, class, and national difference have a profound effect on how any culture understands its own boundaries and can be thought as the third stream of ideas, just as important for understanding 'race' as other histories of contact."

But Shakespeare, though not a scholar in racism or racialism, has shown a deep understanding of the different aspects of race – be it the otherness brought out by education (Shylock), or by natural traits, such as dark skin (Othello). Shakespeare's understanding of the other is by no means racist, but racialist in its essence. There is no perfect race; Jews and Christians, Black and Whites alike, are all subject to punishment and ridicule for their vices, and follies, and to praise and veneration for their virtues and qualities. To cite from Chung-huan Tung's excellent article, "The Jew and the Moor: Shakespeare's Racial Vision," Shakespeare's is a vision in which

> "the Jew and the Moor, together with the Christians and the Venetians, are equally condemned for their vices, ridiculed for their follies, venerated for their virtues, and praised for their merits; a vision, actually, in which personage is not just skin deep, and barbarism is not just Barbary's unique racial badge; in which, finally, all races, in all classes of both genders and in all walks of life, are asked to see real differences between appearance and reality, rather than seek superficial differences among races in terms of nature or nurture."

To conclude, racialist Shakespeare was only responding to the demands of his time.

BDD-A28685 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

APPIAH, Kwame Anthony. "Racisms" in *Anatomy of Racism.* Ed. David Theo Goldberg Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

HABIB, Imtiaz. *Shakespeare and Race: Postcolonial Praxis in the Early Modern Period* (Lanham M.D. University Press of America, 2000)

LOOMBA, Ania. *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* ,Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

LOOMBA, Ania. *Shakespeare, Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* , Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1989.

MACDONALD, Joyce. *Race, Ethnicity, and Power* in the Renaissance, London: Associated Univ. Presses, 1997.

PARKER, Patricia." Fantasies of "Race" and "Gender" . Africa, *Othello* and Bringing to light. In Women, "Race"and Writing in the Early Modern Period. Ed Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, London, Routledge, 1994.

TODOROV, Tzvetan. "Race and Racism." Trans. Catherine Porter. *Theories of Race and Racism.* Ed. Les Back & John Solomos. London & New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 64-70.

WILDERS, John, ed. *Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice* ,London: Macmillan, 1969.

BDD-A28685 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:27 UTC)